

VZCZCXRO7695
RR RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH
DE RUEHHI #0160/01 0450523
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 140523Z FEB 08
FM AMEMBASSY HANOI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7160
INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH 4283
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0044
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 000160

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: CATHOLIC CHURCH PROTESTS: DIFFERENT LOCATION, SAME ISSUES

REF: HANOI 097

HANOI 00000160 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (U) Summary: While there has been apparent progress in defusing the dispute over the former Vatican residence in Hanoi, another dispute has arisen at Thai Ha parish in Hanoi where the GVN's approval of construction of a state-owned sewing factory on the disputed property triggered a wave of protests. Parish leaders told poloff that, while several online religious news services reported demonstrations at the site with numbers up to 10,000 people, it was actually a special Mass that drew close to 10,000 people, including many from dioceses outside of Hanoi. The church officials also said that parishioners are reporting indirect harassment from security officials, but there have been no arrests or injuries. The Hanoi People's Committee has temporarily halted construction at the site, while an investigation into the church's claims continue. The case highlights the growing need for some mechanism to handle other long-standing land disputes between religious congregations and the GVN. End summary.

Background: Church Property Taken By GVN

¶2. (U) The Redemptorists (a Roman Catholic missionary order) bought a piece of land of more than six hectares at Thai Ha, in central Hanoi, to build a convent and a church in 1928. The convent was inaugurated in 1929 and the church was inaugurated six years later, in 1935. The communist government took over a large portion of the property in 1959, converted the convent into Dong Da hospital, and distributed or sold off large parts of the land over the objections of the church, reducing the original 61,455 square meters to the 2,700 square meters the Church controls today.

¶3. (U) The church submitted its first request to government authorities for the disputed land in 1993, and submitted repeated requests asking for return of the land without receiving any official response or resolution. Parish leaders told poloff that various offices of the GVN have told them either they have no foundation to their claim or that they should wait and the dispute will be resolved according to the law. While the church claims the GVN never officially took control of the disputed site as the GVN has never made an official decision in writing, the GVN has control of the property and permitted a formerly state-owned company, Chien Thang company, to construct a factory and to sell off parts of the land the company does not need to other businesses.

Construction of Factory on Site Triggers Protests

¶4. (SBU) Church officials told poloff that on January 6, approximately 3000 people, encouraged by the crowds gathered at the disputed site of the former Vatican residence (reftel) and angered at the decision of the local authorities to approve the start of construction of Chien Thang sewing company, gathered at the

construction site in protest. Approximately 100 police and security officials were present, some in riot control gear. Security police, some in uniform and some in plain-clothes, took photos and filmed with video cameras, attempting to catch agitators in the act. While no one was arrested, detained, or injured, church officials said the local police were verbally abusive and roughly manhandled some of the crowd. By the evening, most of the parishioners dispersed, leaving approximately 100 people who spent the night on the street alongside the property.

15. (U) Over the next several days, parishioners, with help from the church, erected two tents for those who wished to stay overnight at the site. Poloff observed these tents still in place, along with a growing number of crosses and candles attached to the wall separating the street from the construction site. Twenty to thirty people continue to spend the night at the site.

16. (U) In the weeks following the initial protest, the church exchanged a number of official letters and met with local authorities, who orally promised the construction work would cease while the Hanoi People's Committee conducted an investigation into the dispute. However, during this time the Hanoi People's Committee issued both an official order authorizing the sewing company to resume some work and an official order stopping construction altogether. Church officials seemed bemused by the contradictory orders, but confirmed that construction had indeed stopped and no construction activity, supplies or machinery was observed by poloff during the visit to the site. According to the church, the Hanoi People's Committee is conducting an investigation and they expected to be visited and questioned as part of that process, but did not expect anything to come of it.

17. (U) Small groups of parishioners continued to gather at the site throughout January and into February, usually prior to or following Mass services. While several online religious news services reported demonstrations at the site with numbers up to 10,000 people, church officials clarified that it was a special Mass, held

HANOI 00000160 002.2 OF 002

on Saturday, February 9, that drew close to 10,000 people, including many from dioceses outside of Hanoi. The church, the church courtyard, and many of the surrounding streets, including the street alongside the construction site, were packed with people coming to worship. The head priest said that the main purpose of the gathering was to celebrate Mass, although many of those gathered for Mass did stop at the site and pray.

18. (SBU) The church officials also said that parishioners are reporting indirect harassment from security officials. Police and security officials are reportedly contacting mass organizations, schools, and government offices telling those in charge to discourage their members, students, and employees who might be Catholic, from participating in the gatherings at the disputed site. While some civil servants have understandably bowed to the intimidation, the priests noted that many others continue to stop at the site to pray.

Comment: One Case Among Many to Resolve

19. (SBU) Parish leaders were frank and open in discussing the matter with poloff and provided a three page written report (in Vietnamese) detailing the events and the Church's claim to the land. They expressed hope that if the GVN is willing to seek an amicable solution to the disputed site adjacent to the Archbishop's office, there might be a way to get a positive result in this case as well with continued prayer vigils raising the visibility of the issue. The Thai Ha parish has increased the pressure on the GVN to reconsider their case, but has also highlighted the growing need for some kind of mechanism to handle other long-standing land disputes between religious congregations and the GVN. Without it, the GVN is likely to continue to face repeated protests and continued unwanted publicity and international attention over disputed land, particularly as property values continue to climb and churches face an increasing need for facilities to attend to growing congregations.

